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The parable of the foolish prince; Justin Trudeau sought to lock in his approval at a time when the nation was preoccupied

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Body

In some elections, the vote converges. In others, it diverges.

Canadians came together for Trudeau over Stanfield in 1974, Mulroney over Turner in 1984, Chrétien over Campbell in 1993, Trudeau II over Harper in 2015.

But sometimes votes diverge and just spill all over the place like marbles. That is what ended the Liberals' previous run in power with the messy rejection of Martin for Harper in 2006.

The most recent election just before the pandemic in 2019 was also like that. The party with the most votes, the Conservatives under failed leader Andrew Scheer, became the opposition in a minority parliament. Justin Trudeau was humbled. His brow had darkened both literally and figuratively. But he still won. Eventually, he started wearing a beard as a reflection of the gloomy new times. He had survived his first diverger.

To the Trudeau brain trust, in August 2021, this present election looked like a converger.

Trudeau was surfing the polls. He had cut his hair and shaved. Provinces were reopening and not yet regretting it. Vaccines were abundant. Victory seemed at hand. A Liberal majority seemed in reach.

Who the heck was Erin O'Toole anyway? Has he been building a public profile for 30 years? How could he possibly catch up? They didn't anticipate Afghanistan and the fourth wave. Or at least they chanced it. They let Canadians at large meet O'Toole through an upbeat campaign blitz.

The risk to the Liberals after six years in power was that Trudeau was looking too obviously good at all this. He was getting the hang of the Chrétien-esque opportunism that can sometimes win snap elections for weakened governments looking down at weaker opposition parties. But it can also backfire. The Liberal risk is that, as Gord Downie sang, "there's nothing uglier than a man hitting his stride."

By the time September came, with its frantic culture of protesters outside hospitals and gravel falling on campaigners, it was too late to get back to simply governing. Liberals had telegraphed confidence for too long.

It's a diverger, that's for sure.

This is madness. This looks like risking an adequately functioning minority in the middle of multiple national crises.

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This looks like putting personal fortune over national welfare. It takes America a good six months to warm up to an election, even a minor one. Canada had to do it in a few lickety split weeks while getting the kids back to school. No one could figure out what to talk about, let alone what to vote about.

The reason for this gamble was simple. Trudeau wanted to lock in his approval. Things were fine for him, as prime minister, but they could be better.

It is a familiar storyline.

Canadians recognize it. If Trudeau were a character from a fable, he would be the dog who, walking alongside a river, sees his own reflection in the water. Mistaking it for another dog carrying a better piece of meat, he opens his mouth to snatch it, losing his own real meat in the process. The Dog and His Reflection is an old fable by Aesop, retold innumerable times in various ways, with a moral about trading substance for shadow. It cautions against risking the good in pursuit of the perfect.

"A simple idea can open up more complex thinking," said Pauline Greenhill, professor of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Winnipeg, and Canada's leading academic authority on folklore and fairy tales.

She compared it to the Washington Post's use of "Pinocchios" to measure dishonest statements in politics, which casts the moral character of lies in a familiar Disneyfied childhood context. It is different than a simple fact check. It speaks to the heart.

Fables and folk tales have a way of becoming moral clichés that can drive political impressions. Aesop was a famously ugly slave whose stories spoke truth to power. They were often subversive in their morals, and gave Greeks a way to think about themselves through simple shareable images, like ancient memes. They lasted because of how well they caught on, and how easily they were translated and spread in the ancient world, as far as western China.

One curious thing Greenhill noted about Trudeau is how different he is from the traditional male folkloric hero. In folk tales, which tend to be morally messier than fables, the male hero is usually a third son, not the one who seems likely to end up with the princess. He presents as weak and hopeless, sometimes even a bit of a liability to his family, like Jack with his magic beans before the Beanstalk.

"In the case of these unpromising heroes, they're generally not royal, not privileged, don't come from means, but they do have characteristics of being clever and tricky, but also humble and willing to subordinate themselves and eventually come out on top," Greenhill said.

One common trait is that they recognize the great qualities of other people, and end up benefiting from these "extraordinary companions." In her work, Greenhill studies these companions, who often have some preternatural quality that makes their life difficult, as a way of talking about disability. They may be blind, for example, or have some quirk that surprisingly helps the unpromising hero achieve his goal.

There was a time about five years ago when you could just about shoehorn Trudeau into this imaginary role. Sure, he was a privileged first-born political prince, and he did not seem exceptionally humble or clever, but he had a strong and diverse team and a cabinet with half women, including an Indigenous justice minister. There was a time when he could look forward to an election that was not about him anymore. That time is past. To many Canadians, Trudeau has always presented as destined for greatness. In folklore, that is a dangerous thing to be.

For Trudeau to call a pandemic election because he was up in the polls was calculating and self-serving, said Jeffrey B. Meyers, a law professor at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, B.C. But people often get angry at minority governments when they call elections anyway. The real annoyance is the potential futility of it all, he said, that Canada might end with what looks like the most likely outcome, an expensive and divisive near-reproduction of the previous Parliament.

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With his low profile and short time as leader, O'Toole had "nowhere to go but up," Meyers said. As he did, the crisis in Afghanistan and the accelerating COVID fourth wave knocked Trudeau off his stride.

But the panicked lockdown of Alberta in the final week of campaigning did the same for O'Toole. He campaigned against Liberal plans for mandatory vaccinations and strongly endorsed the summer reopening ordered by Alberta Premier Jason Kenney. O'Toole refused to talk about Kenney's apology for getting the province's response wrong.

Here is a province run by a former top Harper lieutenant who sneered at media for "promoting fear," but was forced into a disastrous emergency announcement of lockdown and a vaccine passport by a COVID surge that was killing an Albertan every hour. There is a fable for that too, about a donkey, a rooster and a lion, in which the donkey's false confidence gets him eaten.

Storylines matter to this kind of thinking. Narrative gets a bad rap these days, with connotations of dishonesty. But stories make sense to people. New events fit best into old stories.

Meyers has written about this in a recent paper, *Toward a Post-Apocalyptic Rule of Law*. In it, he takes note of three elements that have been said to threaten the rule of law: the supposedly "unprecedented" Trump presidency, the supposedly "novel" pandemic, and the supposedly "sudden" changing climate.

On the contrary, he argues, there were no surprises here. The "spectre of these menaces had already penetrated our collective conscious in a way that ought to have changed outcomes," he writes.

These stories were already everywhere in the culture. Pandemics were not novel. Netflix had a vast back catalogue of outbreak movies to satisfy the sudden interest. Every politician in the movies is a tyrant.

The apocalypse is such a familiar setting that there is even a Seth Rogen stoner buddy movie about it called *This Is The End* (2013). None of this is unfamiliar. By the time these disasters are real life, Meyers said, "you're already used to them."

"It's caused a kind of deadening of the senses," he said, but also a "feeling of doom and foreboding."

People are unsure what to think, not because they lack information, but because they have too much of it. From Beijing to London, Washington and Ottawa, the entire political order seems to be "reshuffling," Meyers said, and every little hiccup of that process is freely available on the internet. People whose traditional voting strategy has been to listen to all sides and decide which is best, informed by expert guidance, find that harder to do these days.

Instead, they rely on familiar plot lines about pride, fall, comeuppance, misplaced trust, rash confidence. They rely on fables, a key element of which is that they are set in no particular time, and no particular place, and use only the most common images to cut to the core of human moral experience.

Meyers cautioned against seeing the election campaign through the biography of one charismatic leader, as in the "Great Man" theory of history, and thereby failing to grasp the structural qualities of the decision, and what it might mean for Canada's future society and economy.

He also pointed out the Americanization of Canadian political media, with its single-minded focus on party leaders and ignorance of the local candidates people actually vote for and elect.

A story like that can mislead, he said. But he agreed it is how people think.

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Graphic

The parable of the foolish prince; Justin Trudeau sought to lock in his approval at a time when the nation was preoccupied

Sean Kilpatrick , Pool Via Reuters; What was he thinking? Justin Trudeau risked it all, putting an adequately functioning minority government on the line in the midst of multiple national crises.;

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